



ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT

EFH DESIGNATIONS

January 2002

What is EFH?

In 1996, Congress made significant revisions to the Magnuson-Stevens Act and refined the focus of fisheries management by emphasizing the need to protect fish habitat. Specifically, the Act required that fishery management plans identify as essential fish habitat (EFH) those areas that are necessary to fish for their basic life functions. EFH is defined as “*...those waters and substrate necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity.*” “*Waters*” include aquatic areas and their associated physical, chemical, and biological properties that are used by fish. “*Substrate*” includes sediment, hard bottom, structures underlying the waters, and associated biological communities. “*Necessary*” means the habitat required to support a sustainable fishery and the managed species’ contribution to a healthy ecosystem; and “*spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity*” covers a species’ full life cycle.

Why Designate EFH?

Fishery management goals cannot be achieved if the managed species do not have sufficient suitable habitat. The habitat utilized by a species changes with life history stage, abundance, competition from other species, and environmental variability in time and space. The role of habitat in supporting the productivity of organisms has been thoroughly documented in the ecological literature, and the linkage between habitat availability and fishery productivity has been clearly established for a number of fishery species.

EFH Designation Process

Eight regional fishery management councils and the Highly Migratory Species Division of NOAA Fisheries are responsible for drafting fishery management plans and proposing EFH designations for each life stage of each managed species in their respective jurisdictions. Designations must be based on the best available science and are developed through a public process. Proposed designations are submitted to NOAA Fisheries for final review, including additional public comment. Notice of the approved EFH designations is published in the Federal Register before taking effect.

Challenges to Designating EFH

NOAA Fisheries manages over 700 species under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, ranging from giant tunas to small reef fish, and from salmon to surf clams. Some of these species may spend their entire lives on a local patch of reef, or may span the entire Atlantic Ocean during the course of their migratory patterns. Different species and different life stages of each species have different ecological requirements. In many cases, an area comprising roughly 50 percent to 70 percent of the geographic range of a life stage of a managed species has been identified as EFH. In other cases, the EFH designations are broader



because we know less about which specific habitats are most important for the managed species. Major challenges in EFH designation include acquiring the scientific information necessary to specify which particular habitats contribute most to the growth, reproduction, or survival of target species. In cases where little life history information is known, the EFH guidelines call for identifying EFH based on where the managed species is found in the highest concentrations, or where it occurs most commonly. NOAA Fisheries uses the best available science to identify EFH areas, and is committed to enhancing its knowledge base so it can refine the EFH designations over time.



Does an Area's Designation as EFH Automatically Restrict Certain Activities?

An area's designation as EFH doesn't indicate what kind of activities will or will not be allowed, or change the authority of the fishery management councils and NOAA Fisheries to regulate fishing gear and methods. The intent of the EFH provisions is to highlight the importance of EFH for fisheries, and the need for the fishery management councils, NOAA Fisheries, and other agencies to take these designations into account in considering both fishing and nonfishing effects on habitat.

For more information, contact:

Jon Kurland

Office of Habitat Conservation

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

1315 East West Highway

Silver Spring, MD 20910

(301) 713-2325

jon.kurland@noaa.gov